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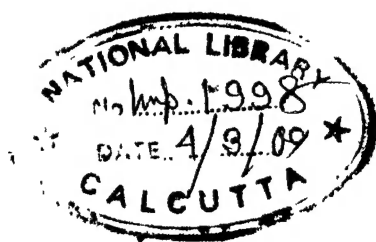
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AT THE CROSS ROADS

BY

Sir Rabindranath Tagore

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AT THE CROSS ROADS

AT the present moment the World Drama is at the change of its acts, and we do not know towards what denouement it is moving. This uncertainty has given rise to a universal perturbation of mind, from which India is not free. But having remained for long outside the arena of living and creative history, we are now, in this crisis, at a loss to know what to do, or how to think. Our mind is enveloped in the dust-storm of exaggerated hopes and fears, and this blinds us to the limitation of facts. When the promise of self-government suddenly showed signs of fulfilment, we failed to see clearly what it meant

to us and how to claim it with justice. The hope of it was spread before us like a feast before the famine-stricken, and we did not know whether there was more danger in gorging ourselves or in desisting from it. The cruelty of the situation lies in the abnormal condition to which we have come through long years of deprivation.

I am fully aware that we have not had the training of taking up the tremendous responsibility of governing our country. The present upheaval in the West clearly shows what terrible power has gradually been concentrated in certain parts of the world, and what a menace it is to those who never had the opportunity or foresight to prepare to meet it. I have not the slightest doubt in my mind as to what would follow if India were completely left to herself. If the birth-throes of the new Japan were to happen at the present time, we know it would be throttled at its birth even as New Persia was.

But our problem is, how are we to receive our lessons in political wisdom discreetly gradual? When an Englishman in England discusses this, he bases his discussion on his full faith in his own countrymen. Personally, I myself have a great admiration for the Eng-

lish people. But it is not the best ideals of a people that govern a foreign country. The unnaturalness of the situation stands in the way, and everything tending to encourage the baser passions of man,—the contemptuous pride of power, the greed of acquisition,—comes uppermost. The responsibility of the weak is tremendous. They keep themselves too obscure to be able to claim human consideration, and the conscience of the strong grows inactive for want of proper stimulus. It is sure to cause moral degeneracy in men to exercise habitually authority upon an alien people and therefore not to encounter the checks that arise from the relationship of natural sympathy. This is evident to us, not only in the callous arrogance of the bureaucracy, but also in the policy of most of the Anglo-Indian newspapers, whose consistent chorus of clamour against the least expression of Indian aspiration, or the possibility of our gaining the slightest privilege now held by the rulers, becomes virulently cruel. It creates a vicious circle,—the helplessness of the governed sapping the moral manhood of the governors, and that again reacting upon the governed, prolonging and deepening their helplessness.

This is the reason why most of our countrymen find small consolation when they are told that the rights and the power of the government of their country will come to them gradually, as they are being made fit, from the hands which hold that power now. The gift is to be cautiously doled out to us by somebody who is critic, judge and donor combined,—and, naturally, not an over-enthusiastic donor. If we could be certain of a genuinely sympathetic guidance we would be content with very little at the commencement. But not having that full confidence in the bureaucratic agency of our donors, our people at the very outset claim those powers which, consciously or unconsciously, may be set against them in making it impossible for them to prove their fitness. No one can pretend to say that the British Government in India has been or ever can be disinterested. It is a dependency upon which depends the prosperity of England, though time may some day prove that such prosperity has not been for the good of the ruling country. But so long as the present cult of the self-worship of the Nation prevails, the subject races can only expect the fragmentary crumbs of benefit, and not the bread of life, from the hands

of the powerful. It will ever be easy for the latter to find plausible arguments to keep the real power in their own hands and to prolong that state in which such arguments cannot effectively be refuted. For the ideal of the Nation is not a moral one,—all its obligations being based upon selfishness with a capital S. It principally recognises expediency in its own conduct and power in that of its neighbours. And as expediency, in God's world, cannot wholly be dissociated from a moral foundation, it finds its place in the Nation's government of the alien people : but it is there on sufferance, it is only secondary' and therefore the Nation's relationship with the non-Europeans easily breaks out into rampage, which is, to speak mildly, not Christian.

The question remains, what are we to do ? Charity, on the one side, self-congratulatory and superior : humble acceptance of small favours on the other side, laudatory and grateful,—this is not the proper solution. We must have power in order to claim justice which is real. It is a blessing that we have the opposition of the powerful to overcome, that a boon cannot easily be given to us, even when there is some amount of willingness on the part of the

giver. We must gain it through victory and never otherwise.

But whenever we speak of power and victory, the words at once conjure up pictures in our minds of Dreadnoughts, long-range guns and massacre of men by millions ; because these belong to the great festival days of the religion of Nation-worship, when human sacrifices must be without limit. For political and commercial ambition is the ambition of cannibalism, and through its years of accumulation it must get ready for its carnival of suicide

I cannot imagine that we shall ever be able to enter into competition about their own methods and objects with these Nation-worshippers, and the boon of their power which they get from their gods is not for us. We must confess that, in spite of considerable exceptions, the Hindu population of India does not consist of martial races. We do not have any natural pleasure or pride in indulging in orgies of massacre for the sake of its glory. Some of our modern disciples of the West may blush to own it, but it is true that the religious training which we have got for ages has made us unfit for killing men with anything like a zest. No doubt, war was held to be a necessity, but only a particular body of

men was specially trained for this work, and, for the rest of the members of society, even the killing of animals was held to be a sin. There is something very harshly unnatural and mock-heroic in the shrill pitch to which we have tuned our voice while vociferating that we are fighters and we must be fighters. I do not mean to say that by training and proper incentives a large number of us cannot be made into soldiers, but at the same time it will serve no good purpose if we delude ourselves into thinking that this is a vocation of life in which we can excel. And if, for the want of natural ferocity in our blood, we cannot excel in this the Europeans, who at present hold the world in their grasp, our soldiers' training will merely entitle us to fight in a subordinate position, which, from a material point of view, will bring us meagre benefits and from a higher one will be productive of evil.

I have been accused of going to the absurdity of the extreme for insisting upon an idealism which cannot be practical. But I assert that the absurdity is not in the idealism itself, but in our own moral shortsightedness. What they mean by saying that we must be practical is that

we must live, and in this one cannot but agree, for suicide can never be an ultimate object for any creature. But fortunately for man his existence is not merely physical or even political. Man has attained all that is best in him by strongly believing that there are things for which he can afford to die. To ask him to lay down his life for some political good, and at the same time to be miserly where the moral good of humanity is in view, is to ask him to pay the highest price yet refuse to accept the thing of the highest value.

There are things in which men *do* go to extremity in the teeth of practical common sense. We have heard of instances where men, set adrift on the sea without provisions, have looked upon each other as possible food in case of emergency. But those exceptions among them who could not think of such an enormity in any conceivable circumstance, have done more permanent service to man by refusing to eat human flesh and dying, than those who survived by following the contrary course. And for nations also, it is wise not to indulge in cannibalism even at the risk of non-survival. For true survival is to live beyond life.

We must bear in mind that Euro-

pean civilisation, which is based on militant Nationalism, is on its trial in this war. We do not know what is going to be the end of it ; for this may not be the last of such wars in Europe. But one thing has been made quite evident, that the attainment of political power has not the moral ideal behind it which can give it the true permanence of finality. Greece still lives where she was truly great, not in her possessions, but in her mind, and Rome survived the wreck of Empires where she attained the immortal. For centuries the Jews have had no political existence, but they live in the best ideals of Europe leavening its intellectual and spiritual life. The political ambitions of fighting races leave no other legacy to humanity but the legacy of ruins ; and the power which grows tremendous, following its narrow channel of self-seeking, is sure to burst its bonds and end in a deluge of destruction.

And therefore, let us not seek the power which is in killing men and plundering them, but the moral power to stand against it, the moral power to suffer,—not merely in passive apathy, but in the enthusiasm of active purpose. This is an age of transition. The Dawn of a great To-morrow is breaking through its bank of

clouds and the call of New Life comes with its message that man's strength is of the spirit, and not of the machine of organisation. It will be the greatest sign of weakness in us,—the most abject defeat,—if we still cling to the atheistic faith that those nations who thrive upon their victims are great because they are powerful, and that sacrifices have to be brought to the altar of their false gods.

I know that an instinctive faith in the adequacy of moral ideals and the inner strength of the spirit for building up the world anew from its wreckage will be held as the sign of ignorance of world-politics : for it does not wholly tally with the experience of the past. But all the fearful danger of the present day has come from that experience hardening into a crust obstructing the growth of spiritual humanity,—the humanity which aspires after an infinite inner perfection. The present-day Civilised Man, disillusioned and doubting, suffers from the moral senility of prudent worldliness, that knows too much but does not believe. Faith is of the future ; it may lead us into danger or apparent futility ; but Truth waits there for us to be courted at the risk of death or failure.

The immense power of faith which man possesses has lately been concentrated on his material possibilities. He ignored all checks from his past experiences when he believed that he could fly in the air ; and even repeated failures and deaths have not deterred him from attaining this seeming impossibility. But he has grown cynically sceptic concerning the infinite reality of the moral laws.

The time for this prudent man has come near its end. The world is waiting for the birth of the Child, who believes more than he knows, who is to be the crowned King of the future, who will come amply supplied with provisions for his daring adventures in the moral world, for his explorations in the region of man's inner being.

We have heard that Modern Russia is floundering in its bottomless abyss of idealism because she has missed the sure foothold of the stern logic of Real Politik. We know very little of the history of the present revolution in Russia, and with the scanty materials in our hands we cannot be certain if she, in her tribulations, is giving expression to man's indomitable soul against prosperity built upon moral nihilism. All that we can say is that the time to judge has not yet come,—

especially as Real Politik is in such a sorry plight itself. No doubt if Modern Russia *did* try to adjust herself to the orthodox tradition of Nation-worship, she would be in a more comfortable situation to-day, but this tremendousness of her struggle and hopelessness of her tangles do not, in themselves, prove that she has gone astray. It is not unlikely that, as a nation, she will fail ; but if she fails with the flag of true ideals in her hands, then her failure will fade, like the morning star, only to usher in the sunrise of the New Age. If India must have her ambition, let it not be to scramble for the unholy feast of the barbarism of the past night, but to take her place in the procession of the morning going on the pilgrimage of truth,—the truth of man's soul.
